

WHITE PAPER

Addressing the Needs of Students Experiencing Homelessness During the COVID-19 Pandemic

**Highlights from the Alameda, Contra Costa, San Mateo,
Santa Clara, and Solano County Offices of Education Bay Area
Geographic Leads Consortium**



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This white paper was commissioned by the Bay Area Geographic Leads Region and its lead agency, the Alameda County Office of Education. Thank you to the Alameda County Office of Education's Ingrid Roberson, Acting Associate Superintendent of District and School Support, and Juwen Lam, Executive Director of Research, Assessment and Accountability Partnerships, for your vision and leadership in documenting how the five counties in the Bay Area Geographic Leads Consortium are providing support for students experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, gratitude to Shannon O'Brien, Project Director, for being a thought partner throughout the development of this paper.

The following administrators contributed to this project. Without their generosity of time, knowledge, insights, and determination to match the demands of the moment, this white paper would not have been possible.

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BACKGROUND

"We used to live in an apartment. Then we moved in with another family, but mostly I ended up sleeping in the car. Now we're in a shelter, with some other families. We move around a lot, but I always try to go to school. That's where I'm supposed to be."

~ STELLA, AGE 12, ALAMEDA COUNTY

All children and youth need a safe and stable home in order to thrive. Those experiencing homelessness often struggle with hunger, fear of family separation, exposure to trauma, and difficulties with school. Educators have an up-close view of how childhood homelessness puts students at risk for poor academic and well-being outcomes, but educators also see that school success is within reach when policies, programs, and practices effectively remove barriers to learning.

Over the past two years, the five county offices of education in the Bay Area Geographic Leads Consortium — Alameda, Contra Costa, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Solano — have been learning together and sharing approaches for improving outcomes for students experiencing homelessness, with an initial emphasis on reducing chronic absence. These approaches include differentiated assistance strategies, the second tier of state-supported intervention. To document progress, the Alameda County Office of Education partnered with WestEd to identify promising efforts across the Consortium, and to describe how the counties in the Consortium pivoted to meet students' changing needs when school buildings closed and instruction shifted to distance learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Homelessness, by the numbers

On any given day, more than 560,000 people are homeless in America.¹ Over the course of a year, this number swells to more than 3.5 million.² These numbers likely significantly underestimate the extent of homelessness since many people without homes are invisible in their communities. They may temporarily live doubled up with others or in motels, encampments, or cars,³ and because they could not be reached on the streets or in shelters, they were likely left out of official counts.

Among the nation's homeless population, more than 1.5 million students, from kindergarten through grade 12, experience homelessness at some point during a school year, totaling about 3 percent of all students in public schools in 2018.⁴ This is the most current official count, and is a record high. These children and youth "lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence," the U.S. Department of Education's definition of homelessness.⁵

In California, the number of students experiencing homelessness is also staggering, and has increased by 48 percent over the past decade.⁶ The number keeps rising higher than in any other state, with about 270,000 students identified by California public schools in 2019, or about 4.3 percent of statewide enrollment.⁷ The numbers and percentages of students experiencing homelessness in the state of California and in each of the five counties in the Consortium in 2019 are shown in table 1.

Table 1. Numbers and percentages of students experiencing homelessness, in each of the five Consortium counties and in California (2019)

County or state	Total student enrollment	Number experiencing homelessness	Percentage experiencing homelessness
Alameda	236,076	4,014	1.7
Contra Costa	175,040	3,062	1.7
San Mateo	97,275	2,347	2.4
Santa Clara	276,637	4,409	1.6
Solano	66,140	1,402	2.1
California	6,329,883	269,269	4.3

Source: University of California Los Angeles (2020a, 2020b).

About 2 percent of students in each county were identified as homeless before the outbreak of COVID-19. These rates are expected to increase over the course of the pandemic. Beyond the immediate health effects of COVID-19 and the related health care costs, which can destabilize a family's living situation, the pandemic has caused untold job losses and residential evictions that increase family homelessness.

Causes and consequences of family homelessness

The causes of family homelessness are many and complex. Homelessness signals that families are living in extreme poverty and are forced to ration limited resources for shelter, food, health care, and child care when they are unable to afford basic necessities. Common causes for homelessness include lack of affordable housing, residential eviction, job loss, divorce or separation, domestic violence, and health problems.

The consequences of experiencing homelessness during childhood are also many and complex. Research confirms what educators routinely observe in classrooms – that homelessness is associated with a number of concerning outcomes. Students experiencing homelessness are more likely to have serious physical, mental, or behavioral health challenges than their housed classmates. They are also more likely to achieve below grade level, repeat a grade, miss school,

or drop out before graduating from high school.⁸ To show some of these outcomes in each of the five counties in the Consortium, table 2 displays the rates of suspension, chronic absence, and graduation for all students and for students experiencing homelessness in each of those counties, as well as in the state of California. Across each of these outcomes, students experiencing homelessness fared worse, compared to all students, in each of the counties.

Table 2. Suspension, chronic absence, and graduation rates, by all students and by students experiencing homelessness, in each of the five Consortium counties and in California (2019)

County and state	Percentage of students suspended: All	Percentage of students suspended: Homeless	Percentage of chronically absent students: All	Percentage of chronically absent students: Homeless	Percentage of students who graduated: All	Percentage of students who graduated: Homeless
Alameda	3	8	15	44	87	57
Contra Costa	5	13	12	41	89	72
San Mateo	3	4	10	21	88	62
Santa Clara	3	5	9	38	86	35
Solano	6	11	14	36	85	73
California	4	6	12	25	85	75

Source: University of California Los Angeles (2020b).

McKinney-Vento services and supports

Schools serve as a safety net for students experiencing homelessness. Schools provide food, clothes, health services, academic help, emotional support, and before- and after-school activities, among other services. The federal McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act ensures that students experiencing homelessness have access to the full range of supports needed for academic success. McKinney-Vento protects students' rights to immediate enrollment, school stability, transportation, and family assistance.

With school buildings closed due to the pandemic, this safety net was disrupted at the same time that conditions for students experiencing homelessness worsened. Like their housed classmates, these students were expected to shelter in place, maintain social distance, wash hands, and wear masks in order to reduce transmission of the COVID-19 virus. They were also expected to participate in their school's distance learning activities — all without a stable home or an appropriate place to remotely attend school. County offices of education and districts faced new challenges in how to reach and teach these students.

Based on interviews, after schools reopened in fall 2020, with 20 county administrators from the five counties in the Consortium, the following section highlights selected ways in which these counties are meeting the demands of the moment for students qualifying for McKinney-Vento services.

County Highlights:

ALAMEDA COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

The Alameda County Office of Education provides leadership and services to 18 school districts. Among them, in 2019, seven districts met criteria for differentiated assistance based on outcomes for students who qualified for McKinney-Vento services, down from 10 districts in the previous year. This improvement is partly attributable to county efforts that clarified liaison roles and responsibilities and that strengthened district capacity to collect and use data about students experiencing homelessness and to coordinate and align McKinney-Vento services with other available supports. With the outbreak of the pandemic and the resulting school closures, the county built on these efforts and stepped up in other ways.

Reaching and teaching students experiencing homelessness

The county helped students experiencing homelessness to continue to participate in school and supported teachers to address their learning needs in the new context in a number of ways. Selected examples include:

- **Shifting strategies for outreach and identification:** Prior to the pandemic, the county worked with district liaisons to train school staff to recognize the signs of homelessness and to help families self-identify and qualify for McKinney-Vento services. During the differentiated assistance process, staff used a "[process map](#)" to chart how students experiencing homelessness were identified, resulting in a strengthened and codified approach for intake and access to resources. Clarity about identifying students experiencing homelessness has been key as the county shifted its outreach strategies during the pandemic. "Since we've lost the opportunity for daily touchpoints," explained a county administrator, "we got creative tracking down families experiencing homelessness." For families who were not reachable by phone or email for a wellness check, some districts carried out "socially distanced 'home visits' to shelters, motels, parking lots, or wherever homeless families were." Conducted by a multidisciplinary team consisting of a district liaison, a social worker, and an information technology staff member, these visits checked on family needs, including shelter, food, health, mental health, and participation in distance learning. Some outreach efforts resulted in identifying additional families who qualified for McKinney-Vento services.

- **Providing technology and connectivity:** "With boots on the ground," the county swiftly coordinated with districts to distribute technology devices and set up Wi-Fi hotspots, prioritizing delivery to students experiencing homelessness, reported a county administrator. One barrier was providing enough individual hotspots. To address this, the county, along with partnering cities, designated buses as hotspots in parking lots near where families live, and also set up hotspots in shelters and at a centralized apartment complex. Students living in cars were given charging devices.
- **Intensifying support for districts:** Prior to the pandemic, the county convened quarterly meetings for district liaisons to share best practices. With the onset of sheltering in place, the county temporarily increased the frequency of these meetings to weekly, to address emerging challenges and solutions. Liaisons now meet monthly through the Student Services Council. "What's different," explained a county administrator, "is the intensity of working together and getting into the weeds, details, and structures of giving support."
- **Aligning systems in the county:** In response to the pandemic, the county intentionally worked with and collaborated across departments to provide coherent, dependable, and timely messaging and information about student support resources, state legislation, and public health guidance. "We wanted to have as many touchpoints with our district staff as possible," explained a county administrator, "but we wanted the information to be consistent." By aligning its systems, the county strengthened interdepartmental communication and streamlined its efforts during a time of urgent and rapidly changing priorities.

Meeting the well-being needs of students experiencing homelessness

The county prioritized a number of ways for addressing the physical safety, emotional support, and basic needs of students experiencing homelessness. Selected examples include:

- **Continuing to distribute food and other supplies:** "Everything happened at the food distribution sites," recalled a county administrator. Across the county, free meals were made available to students and families during distance learning. The food distribution sites also gave out school supplies and books, as well as personal protective items such as masks, booties, and sanitizer. These sites also acted as Wi-Fi hotspots and as technology distribution centers for families to receive Chromebooks and charging devices. In one small district with only a few students experiencing homelessness, the district offered grocery store gift cards to provide food to families, instead of using a distribution hub.
- **Offering curbside counseling:** In some districts, liaisons "met families where they were at — literally," explained a county administrator. Liaisons reached out to build caring, trusting relationships with families experiencing homelessness — in shelters,

at parking lots, and on the streets — to help link them to county and district resources and to help their children fully participate in distance learning.

- **Collaborating with cross-sector agencies to provide full-service supports:** With the pandemic, preexisting county partnerships with community partners have become more “intense, intentional, regular, and collaborative,” observed a county administrator. The county works with various agencies to access supplies and services. For example, SupplyBank.org has, for many years, provided the county with school supplies for students qualifying for McKinney-Vento services. The county also works with Alameda’s Health Care Services Agency to provide immediate shelter or other housing placements and supportive services, and works with faith-based organizations that provide shelter and case management services, helping families to navigate homelessness during the current public health crisis. New partners have also come forward to help, including BANANAS, a child care referral and resources agency, and Children’s Hospital Oakland, which provides COVID-19 testing as well as immunizations and other health-related services.

New hurdles and opportunities

The pandemic and school closures added further complexity to county efforts to support students experiencing homelessness. Some of the new hurdles to overcome include:

- Students experiencing homelessness, as well as students in foster care, miss going to school, especially for the social connections. With school buildings closed, county administrators worry about the emotional toll of social isolation on these students.
- Students experiencing homelessness need headphones for distance learning, to quiet distractions that are barriers to learning in their living situations.
- Despite the common assumption that children and youth are technologically savvy, students who are experiencing homelessness or in foster care need technical assistance to fully participate in distance learning, including help with how to use online systems such as Google Classroom and Zoom breakout rooms.
- The county will need to identify promising strategies for reengaging students who are not logging on or checking in. The county is also thinking through how differentiated assistance can be used to home in on data related to attendance, engagement, and learning acceleration for students receiving McKinney-Vento services.

CONTRA COSTA COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

The Contra Costa County Office of Education provides leadership and services to 18 school districts. Among them, in 2019, four districts met criteria for differentiated assistance based on outcomes for students who qualified for McKinney-Vento services, down from seven districts in the previous year. This improvement is partly attributable to county efforts to strengthen district capacity in identifying students experiencing homelessness and to optimize student support systems that were underutilized in districts and communities. With the outbreak of the pandemic and the resulting school closures, the county built on these efforts and stepped up in other ways.

Reaching and teaching students experiencing homelessness

The county helped students experiencing homelessness to continue to participate in school and supported teachers to address their learning needs in the new context in a number of ways. Selected examples include:

- **Shifting strategies for outreach and identification:** Prior to the pandemic, the county worked with district liaisons to train front office staff, registrars, and counselors about the signs of homelessness and to help families self-identify and qualify for McKinney-Vento services. “During distance learning, it’s teachers who are the main eyes and ears,” observed a county administrator. The county shifted to training teachers to detect online signs of homelessness and to reach out with resources for families. It also developed a “tips for teachers” handout with promising strategies for identification, such as “using the Zoom camera as a window into a student’s living situation.” The handout also included family outreach strategies such as distributing a [county-made informational poster](#), bundled with a food donation.
- **Filling technology and connectivity gaps and providing technical assistance:** Technology devices were mostly provided by the districts, prioritizing distribution to students experiencing homelessness or in foster care. The county supplemented this by providing Wi-Fi hotspots to individual families and to groups of students staying in shelters, enabling access to school during distance learning. However, teachers still reported ongoing connectivity issues. “These glitches can throw students off, and it’s hard to get them back on,” worried a county administrator. To help families use the devices and online systems, some districts set up an IT hotline or scheduled Zoom “office hours” for families to receive one-on-one assistance. Being able to charge devices remains a challenge for students living in cars.
- **Creating a suitable place for students to learn:** Whether temporarily living doubled up or at a motel or shelter, students experiencing homelessness need space to participate in distance learning. To address this, the county provided these students

with desk dividers to demarcate their work spaces, and headphones to minimize distracting noise.

- **Working more frequently and with more intentionality with liaisons:** Pre-pandemic, the county convened district liaisons quarterly for training and support. It now meets individually with most districts each month, either in small groups or one-on-one, to help liaisons navigate the challenges of providing McKinney-Vento services in the current context. In a district that offers full-service community schools, the county now also attends “triage meetings” to share promising practices to reduce chronic absenteeism among students experiencing homelessness and to prevent these students from being dropped from rosters.

Meeting the well-being needs of students experiencing homelessness

The county prioritized a number of ways for addressing the physical safety, emotional support, and basic needs of students experiencing homelessness. Selected examples include:

- **Adopting well-being checks for families experiencing homelessness:** The county codified how well-being checks were to be conducted. Using a scripted protocol, district and school-site liaisons contacted families by phone to have compassionate conversations about safety, health, housing, food, child care, and other necessities, as well as academic supports and technology and connectivity needs. These check-ins activated resources and referrals as needed. In districts with school-site liaisons, these staff were either social-work interns from regional universities or wellness staff in community schools who help “to penetrate McKinney-Vento services” from the county and district to the school, as a county administrator explained.
- **Collaborating more intentionally with partnering agencies:** The county works across sectors to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness. For example, when school buildings closed, the county sent welcome packets to shelter case managers to give them information about connecting with the district liaisons, understanding McKinney-Vento education provisions, and encouraging coordinated responses to families. County staff also serve on the Contra Costa Council on Homelessness and other public decision-making bodies, and engage in cross-training with partners such as the county’s 211 Crisis Center. The county has a particularly strong partnership with Contra Costa Health Services’ H3 (Health, Housing, and Homeless) Program’s Youth CORE (Coordinated Outreach Referral and Engagement) teams. The Youth CORE teams are charged with locating, engaging, stabilizing, and sheltering people living outdoors. The teams also work with the county to address complex situations, such as an elderly grandparent caring for a child while experiencing homelessness.

New hurdles and opportunities

The pandemic and school closures added further complexity to county efforts to support students experiencing homelessness. Some of the new hurdles to overcome include:

- Students experiencing homelessness are reportedly having difficulty bonding with their new teachers in a virtual context.
- With school buildings closed, students experiencing homelessness lack peer interaction and socialization. County administrators worry that this social isolation can affect healthy development during childhood.
- Special education services and English language learner supports are provided to students experiencing homelessness, but full implementation is challenging.
- Some districts have been forced by budget constraints to combine the foster youth liaison and the McKinney-Vento liaison into one position, "leaving these staff with less time and less capacity" to carry out their work, reported a county administrator.
- In some districts, the nature of the work for the district liaison exceeds the role of only one person. The county is considering ways to increase the number of school-site liaisons in these larger districts.

SAN MATEO COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

The San Mateo County Office of Education provides leadership and services to 23 school districts. Among them, in 2019, one district met criteria for differentiated assistance based on outcomes for students who qualified for McKinney-Vento services, down from seven districts in the previous year. This improvement is partly attributable to county efforts to strengthen district capacity to identify students experiencing homelessness, including convening a well-attended countywide summit that focused on the impact of homelessness on schools. It is also attributable to the county taking a systemic, "cross-divisional" approach that pairs county-level school improvement, student services, and school culture/climate teams to address the needs of the whole child. "You can't just have Bloom's taxonomy — you need Maslow's hierarchy too," commented a county administrator. With the outbreak of the pandemic and school closures, the county built on these efforts and stepped up in other ways.

Reaching and teaching students experiencing homelessness

The county helped students experiencing homelessness to continue to participate in school and supported teachers to address their learning needs in the new context in a number of ways. Selected examples include:

- **Providing technology and connectivity:** The county swiftly coordinated with districts, community agencies, and the state to provide students with technology devices and Wi-Fi hotspots, prioritizing distribution to students experiencing homelessness. However, teachers still reported that students were participating in distance learning in cars parked in front of public buildings or in apartment hallways in order to access Wi-Fi.
- **Blending and braiding budgets:** The county assisted districts to identify the multiple federal, state, and local funding sources for students qualifying for McKinney-Vento services and to effectively and creatively bundle those funding sources. This bundling enabled district liaisons and community partners to work together to expand and coordinate services and cross-training. A county administrator observed, "Nothing in the system of supports for students experiencing homelessness works without the other."
- **Opening learning pods at some high school districts:** School-based learning pods are safe, supervised in-person school options to supplement distance learning for students who need a dedicated place to attend school and additional and individualized academic supports. Students qualifying for McKinney-Vento services are prioritized to attend. The county facilitates conversations among districts to help carry out best practices in learning-pod settings.
- **Rethinking grading and testing:** With distance learning and the virtual school schedule, teachers are relying less on tests, and more on assignment completion, to determine grades. The county is assisting districts to offer more authentic and asynchronous assessment opportunities for students to demonstrate what they know and have learned. These assessment choices may be especially important for students experiencing homelessness, given these students' challenges with internet connectivity and daily attendance.
- **Cultivating student voice:** The county's student advisory board formed a sub-committee on students in foster care or experiencing homelessness, which invites students with lived experiences to describe their needs and to advise on McKinney-Vento services.

Meeting the well-being needs of students experiencing homelessness

The county prioritized a number of ways for addressing the physical safety, emotional support, and basic needs of students experiencing homelessness. Selected examples include:

- **Continuing to distribute food:** The county developed an online, interactive map of district distribution locations offering free family meals during distance learning, and a one-page handout, in multiple languages, of these locations for partnering agencies. The San Mateo County Board of Supervisors also funded, for the remainder of the year, universal meals for families residing in the six districts with the greatest needs.

- **Taking a “360-degree view” of students experiencing homelessness:** To eliminate nonacademic barriers to learning, the county provides wraparound supports for students’ basic needs, such as food, clothes, hygiene products, and school supplies, as well as links to partnering agencies that can assist with housing, child care, legal assistance, and case management.
- **Ramping up training for trauma-informed care:** “We’re trying to make everything trauma-informed, given the pandemic is hurting everyone, and [is hurting] vulnerable populations even more,” reflected a county administrator. The county provides intensive training and assistance for district teams to implement evidence-based practices, such as a [trauma-reduction framework](#).
- **Collaborating more frequently and intentionally with partnering agencies:** The county works across sectors to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness. “Cross-pollinating” with training and services is particularly effective. For example, the county co-developed a kindergarten transition program with a non-profit that serves families with children ages zero to five. By extending the role of their family navigators “to make a warm hand-off” to schools, students experiencing homelessness who entered kindergarten retained continuity of supportive services.

New hurdles and opportunities

The pandemic and school closures added further complexity to county efforts to support students experiencing homelessness. Some of the new hurdles to overcome include:

- Without having informal, in-person clues that students are experiencing homelessness, it has become even more challenging to identify these students in order to reengage them in school and provide them with McKinney-Vento services. Finding better ways to identify high school students is particularly critical since these students often avoid being identified.
- With school buildings closed, students experiencing homelessness lose access to normalized peer interactions and opportunities for play, social development, and friendship. A county administrator worried that “their social world is collapsing.”
- Although some county family shelters are open during the day, these shelters are not equipped with quiet spaces for students to attend school online. Similarly, having multiple children attending school online in cramped, multi-family living situations is not conducive to learning.
- The ability of staff to identify and support unaccompanied students experiencing homelessness continues to be a challenge, and has become more complicated during the pandemic.

- Students already behind in course credits due to homelessness are dropping out of school to care for younger siblings and to work.
- To ensure that the use of best practices translates effectively from the district level to the school-site level, schools, as well as districts, need designated McKinney-Vento liaisons.

SANTA CLARA COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

The Santa Clara County Office of Education provides leadership and services to 32 school districts. Among them, in 2019, three districts met criteria for differentiated assistance based on outcomes for students who qualified for McKinney-Vento services, down from nine districts the previous year. This improvement is partly attributable to the county better understanding the academic and well-being needs of students experiencing homelessness and strengthening its approach to differentiated assistance. With the outbreak of the pandemic and school closures, the county built on these efforts and stepped up in other ways.

Reaching and teaching students experiencing homelessness

The county helped students experiencing homelessness to continue to participate in school and supported teachers to address their learning needs in the new context in a number of ways. Selected examples include:

- **Using real-time needs-assessment data to ensure that students who are most in need have access to technology:** Within days of school buildings closing, the county collected census information from families to determine technology needs for participating in distance learning. The results confirmed a digital divide, triggering the County of Santa Clara to make a substantial budget transfer to the county office of education. This resulted in the quick distribution of technology devices and provision of Wi-Fi hotspots to the highest-need districts and to students experiencing homelessness. Recharging devices was a barrier right away, so the county set up charging stations at district offices and food distribution locations, as well as setting up "connectivity hubs" so that students could download assignments and other online materials.
- **Adopting a continuous-improvement approach to differentiated assistance to help district liaisons pivot during distance learning:** Prior to the pandemic, the county formulated new differentiated assistance teams and shifted from a compliance approach to a continuous-improvement approach. Teams became "thought partners and helpers, not one-offs," said a county administrator. "The entire differentiated assistance process takes districts on a journey of better understanding their systems, finding gaps and holes, and fixing them for McKinney-Vento students," explained another county administrator. "It's a process of getting the people closest to the problem to investigate and strengthen systems, policies, and practices." When the pandemic hit, the liaisons' network benefited from the skilled use of

continuous-improvement strategies. Facilitated by the county, the network brought liaisons together weekly to participate in check-ins, access professional development, and share practices and resources, which helped liaisons respond to the demand for expanded McKinney-Vento services and supports.

- **Creating a check-in protocol for districts to assess the social-emotional and academic needs of students experiencing homelessness:** After hearing feedback from district liaisons about the need for a common way to assess student wellness during distance learning, the county codified a McKinney-Vento student check-in process so that any staff member could assess students' holistic needs. Using a [scripted protocol](#) vetted by mental health professionals, the county empowered district liaisons, teachers, principals, and counselors to contact students qualifying for McKinney-Vento services by phone to have compassionate conversations with their families about safety, physical and mental health, housing, food, child care, and other necessities, as well as academic supports and technology and connectivity needs. These check-ins are tracked so that the county and districts can activate resources to promote student well-being and engagement in school.
- **Supporting districts to open learning hubs at some elementary and middle schools:** District-sponsored learning hubs are safe, supervised in-person school options that some districts have offered to supplement distance learning for students needing a dedicated place to attend school and additional individualized academic supports. The hubs are funded by state After School Education and Safety grant resources. Students qualifying for McKinney-Vento services are among the student groups prioritized to attend, and county administrators reported that these students are benefiting from participating.

Meeting the well-being needs of students experiencing homelessness

The county prioritized a number of ways for addressing the physical safety, emotional support, and basic needs of students experiencing homelessness. Selected examples include:

- **Continuing to distribute food and other supplies:** Free meals are available to students and families during distance learning across the county. Distribution centers are located at transportation hubs, district offices, and areas with significant foot traffic, and are easily accessible to families. Some districts also provide hygiene products, school supplies, learning packets, and books to families picking up food.
- **Building trauma-informed competencies:** Prior to the pandemic, the county launched a three-year training program in several districts, concentrating on evidence-based, trauma-informed, multi-tiered interventions. It is initially focusing on students in foster care and students experiencing homelessness because, as a county administrator noted, "if you develop the system for those most in need, everyone benefits."

- **Collaborating with cross-sector agencies to provide wraparound supports:**

Leveraging partnerships was a “big win” for providing the full range of supportive services to families experiencing homelessness during the pandemic. “The kids can’t engage in learning activities if their personal needs aren’t met,” explained a county administrator. Cross-sector collaboration during the pandemic has yielded both systems-level changes, such as the county requiring all contractors working with children and youth to check students’ enrollment status, and community-based responses, through strategic partnerships with local nonprofits. First 5 Santa Clara County, which operates family resource centers and supplies families with free diapers, wipes, and formula, is a key partner. Other partners, such as a “pop-up” family shelter and a new tiny-house village, help with emergency housing. The county’s Department of Public Health sponsored town-hall meetings about mental health issues and services, and set up telehealth appointments for children and families.

- **Disseminating helpful emergency information, with people available on call to address questions:**

When the pandemic hit, the county set up an Information Command Center and COVID-19 hotline, with people fielding calls about health, COVID-19 testing, and safety from parents and staff alike. The county’s Inclusion Collaborative, originally for parents with children receiving special education services, pivoted to also become a “warmline” about distance learning, offering human-touch advice to families in English, Spanish, Vietnamese, and Chinese. The county also staffed its Emergency Operations Center to field education-related questions and to link families experiencing homelessness with temporary shelters.

New hurdles and opportunities

The pandemic and school closures added further complexity to county efforts to support students experiencing homelessness. Some of the new hurdles to overcome include:

- Family shelters in the county are closed during the day for children under age 18 unless they are with a parent. Young children whose parents work during the day might qualify for free in-person child care, but youth over age 12 have nowhere to go.
- County administrators worry about unaccompanied homeless youth who “have vanished from our radar.”
- Responding to the pandemic called attention to the county’s “many silos” and affirmed the need for a “single system of support model,” explained a county administrator.

SOLANO COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION

The Solano County Office of Education provides leadership and services to six school districts. Among them, in 2019, two districts met criteria for differentiated assistance based on outcomes for students who qualified for McKinney-Vento services, down from three districts in the previous year. This improvement is partly attributable to county efforts to strengthen district capacity to identify students experiencing homelessness, and to long-standing collaborative relationships with districts and other youth-serving agencies. With the outbreak of the pandemic and school closures, the county built on these efforts and stepped up in other ways.

Reaching and teaching students experiencing homelessness

The county helped students experiencing homelessness to continue to participate in school and supported teachers to address their learning needs in the new context in a number of ways. Selected examples include:

- **Shifting strategies for outreach and identification:** The county's goal is to "know every McKinney-Vento student by name and need all year," stated a county administrator. Prior to the pandemic, the county worked with district liaisons to train front office staff and teachers about the signs of homelessness and to help families self-identify. When schools closed, the county changed approaches. To confirm families' housing statuses, the county educational liaison reached out to communities through public notices and directly to families at shelters, motels, family resource centers, and other areas frequented by homeless children and youth.
- **Providing technology, connectivity, and technical assistance:** The county swiftly coordinated with districts to distribute technology devices and provide Wi-Fi hotspots. Districts were then able to provide technical support to families experiencing homelessness on how to use the devices and online systems, in order to reduce barriers to distance learning assignments and activities.
- **Transitioning professional development and resource materials to online formats:** Prior to the pandemic, the county provided extensive training in Multi-Tiered Systems of Support, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and Universal Design for Learning. After the pandemic hit, these trainings were modified into online modules, which were coupled with virtual professional learning supports and content-area instructional coaches to help districts adapt these strategies to the virtual classroom context. The county also built Padlets for each district administrator, and customized trainings for them and their staff. These weekly trainings focus on developing relationships with students and incorporating best instructional practices into a virtual context, helping teachers to "build robust online classrooms and design lessons without learning barriers."

Meeting the well-being needs of students experiencing homelessness

The county prioritized a number of ways for addressing the physical safety, emotional support, and basic needs of students experiencing homelessness. Selected examples include:

- **Continuing to distribute food:** Free meals were made available to families at drive-through locations across the county during distance learning.
- **Infusing social-emotional learning throughout the curriculum:** Prior to the pandemic, the county had reinforced the value of integrating social-emotional learning content, throughout the school day, into both instruction and other developmental activities. Given student distress over school closures, especially for those experiencing homelessness, districts received training to embed social-emotional learning and coping skills in all distance learning activities.
- **Expanding student mental health services through partnerships:** At the time of the COVID-19 outbreak, the county was piloting an online universal mental health screener (mdlogix), which also identified homelessness, at its community schools. Based on the results of the screen, the county provides students with multi-tiered interventions. Use of the screener is expanding to a one-district pilot, with possible follow-up adoption in other districts. The county also contracts with local universities to provide internships to clinical interns at some of the county's 35 school-based wellness centers, which also provide McKinney-Vento services. Virtual services are currently offered, and in-person supports will resume when schools reopen. In addition, the county partnered with a health care vendor to launch telehealth services to meet students' physical, mental, and behavioral health needs.
- **Collaborating more frequently and intentionally with partnering agencies:** The county works across sectors to meet the needs of students experiencing homelessness. For example, staff serve on the Housing First Solano Continuum of Care and the Solano Children's Alliance. The county works closely with other youth-serving agencies, such as the Department of Behavioral Health to oversee the school-based wellness centers, the Child Welfare Services' Commercially Sexually Exploited Children Steering Committee to prevent trafficking, the Pride Center to assist homeless youth forced from their family homes due to their sexual orientation or gender identities, and family shelters.

New hurdles and opportunities

The pandemic and school closures added further complexity to county efforts to support students experiencing homelessness. Some of the new hurdles to overcome include:

- Regional homelessness has increased as a result of wildfires, the economic downturn, and the scarcity of affordable rental housing.
- Finding and engaging with families of students who are experiencing homelessness and who have individualized education plans, in order to deliver online special education services, is challenging.
- County and district staff are “overloaded” with quickly changing information, a county administrator observed, “which does not always trickle into the hands of the teachers or front-line practitioners.” The county now condenses information via Padlets to streamline the flow of communication.
- The county is experiencing an increased need to support the well-being of its workforce. Teachers are exhausted from transitioning to distance learning, are missing human connection with their students and colleagues, and are experiencing their own traumas and family stresses related to the pandemic. The county now offers trauma-informed clinical care, encourages self-care strategies for educators, and offers a free [Nurturing Community Zoom Series](#) focused on enhancing personal wellness.

CONCLUSION

The course of the COVID-19 pandemic and its long-term effects on public schooling remain uncertain, but it is clear that returning to business as usual is unlikely in the short term. The five counties in the Bay Area Geographic Leads Consortium, and their nearly one hundred districts, continue to provide uninterrupted and expanded McKinney-Vento services and supports despite unprecedented disruptions to schools and to families. While these counties' efforts alone cannot reverse the impact of childhood homelessness or school closures, they can continue to make a positive difference in the lives of more than 15,000 students without a stable place to call home.

ENDNOTES

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Suggested citation: WestEd. (2021). *Addressing the needs of students experiencing homelessness during the COVID-19 pandemic: Highlights from the Alameda, Contra Costa, San Mateo, Santa Clara, and Solano County Offices of Education Bay Area Geographic Leads Consortium*.

This brief was prepared by the Center to Improve Social and Emotional Learning and School Safety at WestEd through a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education under grant S424B180004. Its content does not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the funder, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government or policies of the funder, nor does mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations imply endorsement by the U.S. Government.